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It Ain't Trickin' If You Got It: Pre-Colonial African Trickster Deity Traditions Manifest in New Millennium Rap Music

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to explain how the contemporary rapper and his/her cultural function descends from the cultural manifestation of West African tricksters who, like rappers, mediate between communal masses and authoritative power structures. Specifically, this article explores specificities of ancient African trickster traditions and illumines how various trickster traditions took root and form in Post-Civil Rights American south. When surveying the abundant canon about Hip Hop, few texts discuss the critical importance of millennial Hip Hop. This work advances that conversation by qualitatively analyzing the lyrics of top albums in the year 2000.

Introduction

A plethora of contemporary work excavate rap music genres and their legacy throughout the diaspora. Most researchers link American rap music to former African American musical genres. In *Introduction to Black Studies*, Dr. Maulana Karenga purports:

> …{it} is correct, however, to put the origins of rap back even further within the context of Black musical history as well as the African Cultural tradition of Nommo or oratory…. The form clearly evolves in the tradition of oratorical modes such as "signifying" and "playing the dozens" as well as "rapping" in both the sense

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of skilled word use to achieve given ends (Karenga 1983).

Yet most contemporary works fall short in excavating the ancient African lineage of contemporary rap music. This article explores the ancient and precolonial African manifestations in millennial rap music—specifically rap music in the Post-Civil Rights era. Further, this article asserts that there exists a lineage of precolonial African trickster deities manifest in the Post-Civil Rights era southern rap music. A content analysis of the top singles lyrics from the number one albums of southern rappers in the year 2000 reveals the presence and function of contemporary African American trickster deities. The millennium is significant as there is scant Africana centered academic research exploring this era of rap music as African centered. To cogently understand rap music as inherently African, I analyze the function of the precolonial African tricksters of four ethnic groups including Ashanti, Dogon, Fon, and Yoruba. I argue that contemporary lyrics reveal the presence of hybridized trickster traditions. Rediscovering the trickster lineage functioning in rap music is integral to the continued African centered study of rap music genres and Hip Hop culture. Indeed, foundational scholars of African American music and literature assert trickster presence (Gates 1988). Tricksters and trickster-deities reveal what is valued by listeners and how they interact within their community; so, in the year 2000, what do our trickster-rappers say about what African Americans value at the turn of the century?

This article analyzes the content from the top four rap singles according to the Billboard Music charts in 2000 (Billboard.com 2016). Those included are: What'Chu Like (*Unrestricted*) by Da Brat, U Understand (*Tha G-Code*) by Juvenile, Danger (*Let's Get Ready*) by Mystikal and Down For My Ni**as (*Trapped in Crime*) by C-Murder. These songs represent the most popular African American rap music available at the time. Popularity is measured by record sales. Sales indicate consumer consumption of the narrative experiences described on the tracks. These narratives, whether true or not, are the contemporary folk narrative of African Americans (Washington 2015). These rappers behave as real tricksters by embodying trickster traits to act out the values of African Americans and to test the limits of African American thought and episteme. I will analyze lyrics focusing on linguistic forms comparing them to trickster tales, and geographic location as evidence of African

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ancestral inheritance. Lyrics are evidence of an ontological linkage to antiquity. Lyrical analysis doesn't take in to account the rapper outside of the personality they represent on the track.

The African Trickster in Antiquity

To identify the trickster in the aforementioned songs, we must excavate the function of precolonial tricksters who are: Anansi of the Ashanti, Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon, Legba of the Fon, and Esu of the Yoruba. According to Trudier Harris:

> …by definition, tricksters are animals or characters who, while ostensibly disadvantaged and weak in a contest of wills, power, and/or resources, succeed in getting the best of their larger, more powerful adversaries. Tricksters achieve their objectives through indirection and mask-wearing, through playing upon the gullibility of their opponents (Harris 2010, 1).

We must understand the function of the trickster in its original environment, the function of the trickster in their departure from the continent with the onslaught of the institution of chattel slavery, the arrival of enslaved Africans to the shores of the new world, and the functions of the tricksters in the creation of a hybridized African American trickster.

It is important to note that Anubis, the ancient Kemetic god is the elder to the West African trickster deities (Lichtheim 2006). Anubis is known as god of the west and deity who was responsible for transporting the souls of the dead to the underworld. Anubis traversed the realms of the living and the dead, he shape-shifts first, he is the embodiment of word and deed. This is an integral point to note as Anubis' hybrid trickster descendants grapple with dichotomies too. Good and evil, false and true, male and female, are dichotomies that facilitate how researchers interpret and translate data about ancient and traditional African cultures. Further, tricksters flirt with dichotomy and expand how an ethnic group copes with tension in that relationship (Pelton 1980, 10). Centuries past and Anubis is transmuted and transported to the whole of Africa, particularly West Africa. Ethnic groups created by migration, famine, emigration, and invasion held onto their beliefs only modifying them to fit their new physical and epistemological environs. Their tricksters are also

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deified. Their tricksters govern the limits between life and death, they too are shape shifters. Anubis' contemporaries differ from their elder in two very distinct ways. First, differing by how they are canonized. Literature on Anubis the ancient trickster, is not found in tales. The genre of tales had not been formed yet. The genre that dominated in the time of Anubis were funeral epitaphs which were found in the tombs of kings. Secondly, it is in ancient Kemet one's station in life was reflected in the kind of funeral ritual that was performed. However, a shift occurs and the dichotomy of king and commoner collapsed. Now considered equal in death, via mummification, embalming and spells told to deceased, living members could use the power of the word help the deceased ascend into the ancestral realm just as Anubis did with Osiris. There is a power that Kemites descendants believed their words held, they employed a trickster to help to decide the meaning, function, and the limits of those words (Lichtheim 2006, 5).

Anansi, of the Ashanti is descendant of Anubis. Synthesized in what present day Ghana Anansi is the hero figure of the Ashanti people. Anansi is described as a spider who can shapeshift often changing into man or an amalgamation of both spider and man. *Anansi Folktales in the Diaspora* by Victorine Grannum-Solomon purports the name Anansi is the "Tshi or Ashanti word for spider and the spider figures" (Grannum-Solomon 2012, 105). She goes on to describe "Anansi who has a metaphoric shape; half-spider, half-man, who through perennially tight situations, is adept at turning the tables on his oppressor and emerging more or less unscathed" (Ibid). *Anansi Folktales in the Diaspora* fails to adequately describe Anansi's character. However, *The Trickster as Selfish-Buffoon and Culture Hero* by Michael P. Carroll examines Anansi's greed, and avarice for food and sex. Carroll asserts "Anansi often acts the role of the greedy and lecherous buffoon. Anansi's lechery, for instance, is evident in those Ashanti myths wherein Anansi marries a whole village of women, describes his penis as being longer than 77 long poles fastened together…" (Carroll 1984, 119). This affirms Anansi's ability to shape-shift. A talent is not germane to Anansi, Esu the trickster deity of the Yoruba is mythologized as being able to morph his physical form. The ability to shape-shift signifies upon the legacy left by Anubis. Shape-shifting signifies death of one self and rebirth of another. Anubis' role in ancient Kemet is to aid souls out of the physical body

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and into the transitioning ethereal realm (Lichtheim 2006).

Comparatively, Esu of the Yoruba is deified as an orisha, as one of the main agents in the creation of the Yoruba way of life. The Yoruba can be found in present day Nigeria, yet practitioners of their spiritual system can be found throughout the Diaspora (Edwards 1985). Precolonial Yoruba understood Esu was:

> …present at the creation of the universe and safeguards the principle of free will, providing, within a limited scope, a chance for a person to decide on his own destiny. This is a very important idea in Yoruba philosophical thought because the Yoruba place a great deal of importance on the act of deciding (Ibid, 17).

Esu is revered and lamented to first in ceremony and ritual. He is known as the opener of the way and governs choice for humankind. He does not make choices for the Yoruba, he is the embodiment of choice, as the Yoruba hold personal character and integrity in ethereal esteem. Esu is the divinity that "brings the spice to life" (Ibid, 18). There is also a hyper sexual nature affixed to the Esu at the marketplace. I concur with Robert Pelton author of *The Trickster in West Africa* who purports: "…Esu embodies sexuality as unleashed desire—not lust merely, nor even avarice, envy or greed, but that passion for what lies outside one's grasp" (Pelton 1980, 161).

The significance of the trickster tale among the Yoruba, lies in the way it pinpoints the centrality of Esu's mediation and work that reifies harmony among the Yoruba.

Neighbors to the south of the Yoruba, are the Dogon. The Dogon originated in the mountainous country in what is now contemporary Mali. Dogon deity and trickster Ogo-Yurugu has the most complicated creation story of the four tricksters mentioned in this study. Author Mary Douglas states: "Dogon divide the world into two categories, those with and those without speech. Babies and animals are in the latter class, for speech is essentially the faculty of speaking an articulated and meaningful language. All living things have a voice… (Douglas 1968, 4). This is also an ancient Kemetic belief. Anubis the elder trickster deity who Kemites believed governed the word. The kind of speech and words that Ogo-Yurugu governs is the crass, vulgar, double-tongued, obnoxious as are his interactions with Amma, his mother and Nommo, his twin.

Douglas reports about the Dogon, "the, biological process

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by which speech and thought are related are quaintly mechanistic… Dogon reflections on speech are inevitably interwoven with their conception of the nature of man, of his place and destiny in the universe" (Ibid). John Roberts, author of *From Trickster to Badman* concurs "The Dogon understand creation to be the work of a 'word,' and they believe that their mythology reveals that same word…story manifests the life of the world because, in some deep sense, it is the world itself in human speech" (Roberts 1990,167). It implies that the Dogon believe that their ancestors spoke them into existence. Ogo-Yurugu's kind of speech and subsequent growl is to show the necessity for the profane as well as the arcane nature of conceiving a world. Nommo, Ogo-Yurugu's twin is vilified as the more noble twin, with good speech associated with his name. Phenomena like the harvest, the end of dry season, and initiatory rites come out of the spirit of Nommo (Douglas 1968, 14).

Lastly, the Fon located in present day Benin employ the trickster deity named Legba. According to Fon history and lore, Legba is the youngest deity born to the high-god Mawu-Lisa. Robert Pelton, author of *The Trickster in West Africa: A Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight* states, "Legba is the agent of heaven, but also the friend of earth, because he like Anansi, domesticates conflict, which the Fon know to have life creating purpose" (Pelton 1980, 76). Here Pelton suggests Legba's function in both the ethereal/divine realm and the tangible reality. Pelton continues, "The Fon set him squarely at all the joints and crossings of the social order to make sure that transactions become transformations as they are meant to. Some transactions, however, are so loaded with danger that they must be forbidden altogether lest structure give way to chaos" (Ibid, 93). It is clearer from this quote that the Fon employ Legba to mediate limits and syphon order out of chaos. In a retelling of how heaven and earth are separate but harmonious. In it Mawu-Lisa employs Legba to heal the fissures among the heavenly entities who are her children and Legba's siblings. The closing of the fissure between the deity-siblings makes it so human life can thrive. Legba, like Anubis, "closes the calabash" (Ibid). Anubis completes the cycle of life.

Along with his conniving familial interactions Legba is known as licentious. His sexual appetite is well documented in tales (Ibid). Master Fon sculptors and woodcarvers create figurines with large erect phalluses to emphasize his capricious sexual

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nature. Another tale relates that Legba engages in intercourse with his sister and his sister's daughter. "When this behavior is uncovered by the high god Mawu, Legba's punishment is that his penis will be forever erect and that his sexual appetites will never be sated" (Carroll 1984, 184).

The New World

After centuries undisturbed, the chaos of the capture and enslavement in the Middle Passage interrupted African cultural continuity. Indeed, the limits of enslavement forced Africans to expand the function of their trickster deity. Aboard ship Anansi, Ogo-Yurugu, Esu and Legba worked together. Using intangible traits and trickster tools: language, dance, sex, and thievery, a hybrid trickster identity was synthesized. All those traits found a home in the conscious and subconscious of captives on board. Captured Africans used the examples set by Anansi, Ogo-Yurugu, Esu, and Legba as told in tales to survive, and met out revenge. Aboard ships any past political and social fissures among these nations had to be set aside—survival was paramount. It was imperative that Anansi, Ogo-Yurugu, Esu, and Legba cooperated regardless of language, region, and ethnic tradition (Levine 1977).

During the Middle Passage, Ashanti, Dogon, Fon, and Yoruba, cultural and spiritual traditions were disturbed, disrupted and revised. Starting as early as the sixteenth century, the phenomena of chattel slavery hybridized the nature of the African trickster (Pelton 1980). The role of the trickster began to change. Africans were no longer in complete control of their daily lives and worship/ritual needs. Forced migration and indoctrination into the European world forced Africans to focus primarily on survival. It pressed captured Africans to maintain a warrior stance and recapitulate the violence that had been done to the them during capture. Yes, there are ancient tales of Anansi, Esu, Legba, and Ogo-Yurugu behaving violently (Ibid). However, that violence was most often intra-cultural and intra-national and in service of the community's collective harmony. The violence of chattel slavery was new to Africans. Their capture and subsequent brutalization changed notions of acceptable behaviors for the transmuted trickster figure. It is impossible to pin point with exactitude the precise moment the enslaved Africans began configuring the New World trickster figure. John Roberts author of *From Tricksters to Badman* asserts: "Africans

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pooled their individual memories and contested their abilities as raconteurs in the telling of animal trickster tales" (Ibid, 84).

Enslaved Africans needed an intermediary between them and their captors. They felt forsaken by their God(s). With the system of chattel slavery in place, Africans had to infuse the traditional trickster with the traits of the slave master. To lie, cheat, and steal for individualistic gain or prominence were unfavorable character traits to possess in Fon, Dogon, Ashanti, and Yoruba cultures. Those traits were banes of the society. As adventures, explorers, missionaries, generals and nobility from all corners of Europe visited and traded they learned the mores of many different African nations. With this information Europeans exploited societal fissures to usurp power, facilitate in the slave trade, and/or circumvent local law (Mannix and Cowely 1976). Africans were captured while working, harvesting, resting, during ritual and war. On the trek to the coast, nation and language barriers among the captured began to melt and meld. Of course, there was a system of trade among other nations, and war, and expansion. Under the duress of capture, communication between different nations of Africans became paramount. Their tricksters would manifest in the first stage of their capture by acting violently, refusing to eat, and running away into familiar terrain forcing the capturer to enter unfamiliar territory (Ibid).

A Note on Methodology

What the rap music genre helps to do is interpret the 21st century trickster and trickster traditions, rappers themselves voice their lineage that I assert begins in ancient Kemet. Investigating West African ontological trickster traditions helps contemporary researchers illumine the African American trickster tradition. There is no litmus test by which to measure the presence of a trickster in contemporary rap music. There are however descriptors, patterns, language and context present in rap in the year 2000 to rediscover and contextualize a trickster as rapper, and rap as a trickster genre.

After reading and studying the origins of rap music and Hip Hop culture, I began to ponder about the literary representation of the rap music produced in the millennium , specifically the year 2000. Major rap music eras have been named and studied by researchers in varying disciplines. There is no standard method by which to engage and study rap music—especially a method that centers the progenitors who are

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African American and diasporic Africans. The Golden era and the Gangsta era provide rich fodder and endearing narratives. Yet, prominent Hip Hop scholars have veered away from engaging the post-eras with verve. They have either continued the study of rap music through one prominent artist/group like author Michael Eric Dyson (Dyson and Daulatzai 2009), or they critique more harshly, like John McWhorter (2008) when it comes to the commercialization of Hip Hop culture and rap music at the turn of the century. The well-researched patterns, characteristics and descriptions of past manifestations of trickster figures in African American literature and music—if applied to rap music in the 21st century—could reveal nuances, once overlooked in the study of rap music in general and specifically in the 21st century.

More specificity is needed in reifying the lineage of the contemporary rapper. Often scholars' historical clock does not extend far enough into antiquity. Time stops/starts at the point of capture, or perhaps even as late as emancipation. That is problematic. W. E. B. Du Bois posits, and I agree, African people did not find themselves in the new world without cultural heritage, ontological or epistemological knowledge of a life pre-enslavement (Du Bois 2010). With that said, it is clear more research needs to address African American inheritances from specific African ethnic groups.

Rap Music in the New Millennium

At the beginning of the year 2000, New Orleans rapper Juvenile topped the Billboard Charts for top Rap Albums. *Tha G-Code* album is an ode to the survival tactics Juvenile employs in his hometown, New Orleans, Louisiana. *U Understand* is the number one single on his album. Juveniles success is a sure sign that the business of music was changing. Larger companies began to combine, independent labels flourished. Indeed, *Tha G-Code* is Juveniles' first album published on a major label.

Atlanta was named as the unofficial hub, rappers in the south carved out a space within the polarizing east coast versus west coast battle. Their gospel, soul, and bass music aesthetic were refreshing to the audio palate of consumers and critics of the time. Rap music in southern spaces was not as gangster as what was coming out of the west, and it wasn't as braggadocio as what was coming out of the east (Chang 2005).

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In the year 2000, rappers garnered more control of their image and streams of income outside of rapping. Hip Hop culture and the rap music genre had matured to about twenty-five years old. The United States was in a time of flux and transition (Rose and Mansbach 2000). There was a presidential campaign and election. Access to technologies like email, music downloading and uploading expanded. Rap music genres and Hip Hop culture started synthesizing a digitized footprint on African American culture and American pop culture. Hip-Hop creators and masters birthed an art form that at once saved people and entertained them. It is the two-voiced narrative of a people under attack (Rabaka 2013). It is the trickster figure alive and well. However, if the listener is not doubly invested in the receipt—nor the speaker in the meta-narrative, he or she will necessarily misrepresent, misunderstand, and insult the complexity of the cultural matrix. Hip-Hop culture has matured and can be found in ivy-league schools, Wall Street, and scripted television series and films. The albums by solo artists available in the year 2000 reflect the lived experience of listeners, critics and the rappers themselves and a hip-hop culture in transition (Cobb 2007).

Technological advancements in home internet access, mobile phone, and cable television networks in the year 2000 gave everyday people—especially African Americans—access to global information in exchange for their personal data. Private information mined from online chatrooms, message boards, and merchants stored online increased in value. Interviewer and author Adam Mansbach suggests in his interview with renowned scholar, Tricia Rose that technology and access to it conjures paranoia among African Americans: "It seems to me that Y2K tension and millennial angst are likely to ramify differently for black artists than for other folks, given that black artists in this country have always had good reason to indulge in a certain kind of paranoia" (Rose and Mansbach 2000, 41). Technology is one of the realms the millennial manifestation of the trickster mediates. To maintain lyrical autonomy, rappers behave as tricksters often do: they code-switch and manipulate language. Or as Mansbach and Rose assert, "There's a kind of hide-and-seek that goes on for guerilla artists, meaning you say things in a certain way, under certain conditions, to a group that's ready to look at you in a good way. You have a kind of secret code and that helps you stay afloat" (Ibid,

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43). This "secret code" is key and, may be expressed through lyrics cloaked in vulgarity, hyper-sexuality, misogyny, homophobia, and virulence. Because of their commercial success, rappers with chart-topping singles and number one albums can communicate to different groups of people, "ready to look at you in a good way" (Ibid).

The Trickster Manifest on *Unrestricted* by Da Brat

Although not reared in the southern states, rapper Da Brat was mentored by southern rap producer, Jermain Dupri. Dupri, was reared by his father, who was a successful executive in the music industry. Nearly a decade before working with Da Brat, Dupri helped to shine a light on southern Hip Hop culture, aesthetics, and rap music. Dupri was responsible for assembling the superstar act, Kriss-Kross along with R&B music group, Xscape, before Da Brat encountered Dupri and became a platinum selling rapper. She was born and reared in the Southside of Chicago. Of her rearing Da Brat explains in a March 2000 volume of *The Source Magazine*: " I was raised sanctified as a kid and couldn't do a lot of things…Had I not been through all that sanctified stuff, I'd be like some of my cousins… they had too much too soon. While they were out partyin' and drinkin,' I was clappin' my hands and stompin' my feet and speakin' in tongues in church" (Renfroe 2000). However, sanctified the album "Unrestricted" and the single, *What 'Chu Like* is far from a church hymnal. In fact, the album title signifies and borrows from raunchy rhythm and blues singer, Millie Jackson's late 80s hit, *Hot Wild Unrestricted Crazy Love* (Jackson 1986).

The chart-topper *What 'Chu Like* is a lyrical dossier of Da Brats' sexual preferences. "I like 'em brown, yellow, Puerto Rican or Haitian/ with good conversation, plenty big faces/ It's a must I stay luxurious…" (Brat 2000). In these lyrics, Da Brat does two things. First, she signifies A Tribe Called Quest's hit song *Electric Relaxation* (Quest 1994). It is important to note that Da Brat inverts the meaning of the original lyrics. A Tribe Called Quest is a rap group from New York, they intended the lyrics to be recited to a woman. Yet when Da Brat adopts the same lyrics, she intends them to be said to a male. The ability to re-shape and reassign meaning to words already known to a canon is a trickster trait. Although none of the precolonial trickster deities are described as just woman or feminine, they are known to be androgynous. Yet, because content of the lyrics of

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What 'Chu Like I posit that it is Legba of the Fon that dominates on this track. Legba is known to have a voracious sexual appetite. Secondly, Da Brat signifies upon the braggadocio nature rampant in Hip Hop culture and the rap genre. Legba is also known to carry trinkets akin to contemporary jewelry, like a smoking pipe, cane, and or whistle. In the first verse of *What 'Chu Like* Da Brat manages to conjure precolonial trickster and pay homage to a classic rap track from a previous era. Continuing, in her lyrics Da Brat exclaims:

> Ain't nothing in the world Brat can't do/ She attractive to them, him, her, and you…/ Frostbit December *Unrestricted*/… Due to the content I suggest you like this (Brat 2000).

At the end of the first verse, Da Brat, like Legba, toggles language and signifies upon herself. By referring to herself and her accomplishments in the third person suggests strength unmatched. Again, Da Brat connotes hyper sexuality by exclaiming that she is attractive to an array of people. Tyrese croons the chorus:

> What do you like?/ A whole lot of foreplay/ Right before you get it started/ What do you like?/ Me on top/ You on the bottom, tight body/… (Ibid).

Here, Da Brat with the help of singer Tyrese straddled the line of clarity by remaining ambiguous.

It seems clear throughout that Da Brat is referring to a heterosexual relationship, but the chorus invites some ambiguity. And indeed, a trick, who is Tyrese begging the question too. In the chorus, the gender binary is not exclusive to heterosexuals but also makes room for folk who identify differently. In the third verse, Da Brat gets more specific. She sets the scene in a club where a cat-and-mouse encounter is occurring.

> Whassup?, The setting, a hot-ass club/ And you still be sweating me/ I don't see nothing wrong with giving a little love…just let me breathe/… No woman can slow dance or throw down like I can/ Ask if you curious to know what I like, man (Ibid).

Braggadocio again, here Da Brat aggrandizes herself. And she inserts the question in the chorus into her verse. To question in the traditional Fon sense is to evoke Legba. Questions represent boundaries and limits or lack thereof. That is where Legba enters to represent choices/

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answers. "What do you like?" is open-ended question, it is an invitation to a trickster to offer a wily answer. That is what Da Brat does. Her response, although crass and vulgar represents in part a function of a trickster.

Contemporary authors like Stallings, Gates and Roberts, pontificate on the present function of an African America trickster. But it is Stallings' work that focuses on the women tricksters and folk traditions. Stallings identifies "nasty girl" motif in order to analyze African American/Black women within folk traditions and cultural productions. Nasty Girl is kin to the Bad Nigger motif found in African American literature and music; in both are hypersexual, violent, brutish, cunning, and licentious. Stallings asserts an important point in her seminal text, *Mutha is Half a Word: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* asserts, "I'm not ready to throw out the 'nasty' girl, that 'bad' girl, and dress her up in her Sunday best,…I refuse to let male supremacists, white, Black, and other, continue to get rich from their version of Black female sexuality that they lord over me" (Stallings 2007, 3). Stallings affirms a safe space for the African American woman rapper to question what society at large thinks her sexual predilections should be. Stallings and Da Brats' works are hand in hand and aid researchers in engaging and reaffirming the trickster and rap traditions in African American folk traditions. Da Brats' work informs Stallings works and as a consequence help to reaffirm the trickster in rap traditions in African American folk traditions.

The Trickster Manifest on *Tha G-Code* by Juvenile

At the beginning of the year 2000, Juvenile was atop the Billboard charts, with the album *Tha G-Code* and the single "U Understand." Hailing from New Orleans and a representative of the Cash Money Millionaires crew, Juvenile had enjoyed substantial success with his previous album *400 Degreez* (400 Degreez 1998). On the G-Code Juvenile reifies unwritten rules to survival in the rap genre, Hip Hop culture and his own home turf. In this way Juvenile on the track "U Understand" is dominated by the precolonial trickster Anansi. In his name Juvenile connotes the kind of antics that Anansi is described as having in what the Ashanti have called *anasesems* (Pelton 1980, 20). Indeed, in several tales Anansi is described as juvenile, and the tales are meant to teach juvenile members of the Ashanti. Anansi is

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also a shape-shifter. Juvenile in "U Understand" signifies upon that essential trickster trait:

> I ain't no pussy ass nigga (you understand)/ I'm a rapper but I'm still a gorilla (you understand) / I'll whip ya like the Thrilla in Manila (ya understand) (Juvenile 2000).

Here Juvenile asserts his hyper-masculinity. Using the female anatomy to describe a powerless person, Juvenile, reassigns power to himself and asserts his maleness as the preferred kind. Juvenile goes on to state his role as a rapper, but suggests that he isn't fully assimilated into that life. Indeed, it connotes a safety in being a rapper that most may miss. It also implies that Juvenile may oscillate between the two roles. The line after suggests that he's ready to combat anyone who thinks he isn't the hyper-masculine, protector (gorilla) and rapper he presents.

The boxing match coined the Thriller in Manila (Muhammed Ali vs. Joe Frazier) was of integral importance not only to the African American culture but to professional sports in America (Mitchell 2015). This match signified two things: the end of Ali's reign in the ring and the changing of the guard in the field of boxing in North America. To signify this boxing match implies that Juvenile uses this match or the opponents to measure his fitness as a fighter. This also signifies the presence of Anansi on this track. For example, Anansi, in several tales, seeks to be the best at everything he does, while employing tricks to gain power to defeat his adversary in a grandiose manner. Indeed, the real Thriller in Manila was a grandiose match with two prolific fighters (Ibid). Juvenile continues:

> I'ma [sp] be here for a little minute wodie [sp] (ya understand)/
> Ain't bout to let nobody f**k over me (ya understand)/
> I don't need ya playa hatin' on Juvey (ya understand) /
> Don't be talkin' about what you gon' do with me (ya understand) (Juvenile 2000).

Here Juvenile tries to quell anyone doubting his place in rap music and Hip Hop culture. Asserting "I'ma be here for a little minute" asserts that Juvenile will be in the rap genre and Hip Hop culture for a significant amount of time, "little minute" means the exact opposite. The inversion of meaning here also taps on the lineage of Anansi especially as the spider, who is characterized as one who the rules do not apply. Anywhere else the phrase "little

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minute" would be redundant because a minute is a standard marker of time that is universal.

Juvenile whispers the chorus, "Shhh be quiet/ tonight is the night that we ride/ Thirty camouflage Hummers with n****s inside/ With choppers, doin' surgery on bodies like they doctors" (Ibid). Again, Juvenile reveals his trickster inheritance through his lyrics. Juvenile repeats a trick of language employing onomatopoeia with "Shhh, be quiet." Next, thirty hummer vehicles are hidden in plain view by "camouflage" another trick that presupposes one would only be able to see one of the largest motor vehicles—a Hummer, if it weren't camouflaged. And in the last line the lyrics meanings are revealed and expanded, "choppers" is code for gun and an actual cutting utensil used by a doctor. "Surgery" then becomes a euphemism for dismemberment by gunshot wound.

In verse two, Juvenile continues the morose tone on the track:

> I'm a[sp] wait until them b**c*es slow down (ya understand)/
>
> Cuz[sp] I ain't tryin' to be jail bound (ya understand) /
>
> It ain't over till the fat man fall (ya understand)/
>
> I'm just waiting in the right phone call(ya understand)/
>
> …N***a got me Imma[sp] go get him back (ya understand)/
>
> One by one the all gonna drop (Ibid).

This track is about revenge, and about the choices available to Juvenile to enact that revenge. Anansi to the Ashanti dwells over the markets and market day. Anansi dwells over negotiations and choices for the Ashanti. With the repetition of " ya understand" Juvenile sonically reinforces his power to choose to be violent. Just like Anansi behaved in the tale above by hoarding food by repeats his performance on his "sick bed" but instead of being directly violent Anansi's voracious greed is the seat of motivation. Anansi's greed, like Juvenile's violent nature are threats to the proximal community.

Lastly in verse three, Juvenile makes recompense, "We bout to go and punish this fool (ya understand)/ Hop out the car and let that iron ring (ya understand)/ That's the end of this stupid ass thing (ya understand)" (Ibid). At the culmination of the hit song Juvenile seems calm and willing to acknowledge that his tiff or the tiff described may not have been so serious—"stupid," in fact. Here, readers may recognize this short trite ending as the tales about

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Anansi end. With an admission of the futility of the anger and the actions that occur thereafter, *U Understand* is a cautionary tale, Juvenile asserts sonically that his function as rapper is not his only function, indeed he traverses the boundaries between Hip Hop culture, the rap genre, and street/gang culture. Like a spider traverse the strands of his web, Juvenile traverses the boundaries of several co-mingling cultures.

The Trickster Manifest on *Let's Get Ready* by Mystikal

Lets' Get Ready, released in early spring of 2000, is New Orleans based rapper Mystikal's fourth studio album. The chart-topping hit "Danger" featuring singer Nivea is dominated by the trickster deity Ogo-Yurugu of the Dogon. As described above Ogo is an incestuous being, concerned with the most crass and vulgar speech. "You know what time it is, ni**a/ And you know who the f**k this is/ Danger, danger get on the floor /The ni**ga right chea sing it/" (Mystikal 2000). At the start of the track Mystikal uses incendiary language to grab the listeners attention. Juxtaposed to the sonic timidity with which the chorus is sung by R&B singer Nivea, Mystikal sounds even more abrupt and excited:

> Go tell the DJ to put my shit on/
> I'm keeping you niggas and bitches in jump from the minute I get on/
> Taking they shirt off, showing they tattoos/
> Screaming and hollering and all/
> Got the gift to come up with it/
> Put it together, deliver it, make them feel it, bitch I been on/… (Ibid).

In the lyrics above the listener is engaged by Mystikal's yelling-rap. His voice resonates like the growl of a ferocious canine. Like Ogo, whose tongue was cut out by his mother who is the creator of the Dogon people, for speaking against her. Along with the sound of Mystikal's voice, the content in the first verse implies that he is empowered by the coarse language and abrupt speech. There is an excitement present in his voice. Mystikal goes on to be braggadocio and offer commentary on his skills as a rapper:

> Sharp like you pulled me out the pencil sharpener/
> Bad like that student in the principal office/
> Put rappers in coffins, they dive like dolphins/
> I'm the damnedest lyrical

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marvel you come across often/
So watch yourself/
Or fuck around and get beside yourself/ I know
Go head though, bounce them titties
Shake that ass, drop that pu**y but stay in line h*
F**k I can't, cause you can… (Ibid).

The admitted sharpness the issue with authority signify upon the relationship between Ogo-Yurugu and his mother Amma. It is uncanny. His rhyme acumen suggests that he has mastered crass and vulgar wordplay and delivery. Specifically, it is Ogo-Yurugu that dominates on this track. The track celebrates the notion of "danger" when what the track calls for is fair treatment. Mystikal is asserting that "danger" may occur if the track isn't played. Along with his description of himself as "sharp" and "bad" he, with the help of Nivea, is saying that it will be danger if this is song is not played at the party. Mysitkal goes on:

Sirens, limousines, and the club ower ya b***h you
If you late, ain't no getting in this bitch cause it's filling up
Inside packed from the floor to the ceiling up
The building ain't big enough… (Ibid).

The physical space is not large enough to accommodate his show, Mysikal is impatient and frustrated like Ogo-Yurugu was all those centuries ago as he left the safety of his mother to descend to the desolate earth. Further:

The rhyme seller, kick ass like Jim Kelly
Stand up, round out, boot up and frown
Tell a n***a if he wanna try it then b***h come on down
No sweat, no blood, no tears
And if I tell you it's the sh*t then, b***h that's what it is (Ibid).

This description of himself is of a hard brute who is accustomed to his work and word being uncontested. Mystikal is as abrasive as Ogo-Yurugu is described in tales of old. I claim that Mysitkal is not aware of his lineage in that Ogo-Yurugu precedes him ontologically and epistemologically. Mystical claims that his rap acumen is inborn and that he controls it. It cannot be farther from the truth, but what is true is that Ogo-Yurugu made the same claims against his mother the High god Amma and his twin sibling Nommo.

The Trickster Manifest on

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Trapped in Crime by C-Murder

Also reared in New Orleans is C-Murder whose birth name is Corey Miller. A member of the No Limit recording company, and brother to the founder and CEO of No Limit records, Percy Miller. In the late 1990's and early 2000s the No Limit recording group dominated the charts as well as the Hip Hop culture and rap music imagination. Neither coastal region (New York or Los Angeles) was as popular as the family run business in the New Orleans. C-Murder had enjoyed moderate success before *Down for My Ni**as* the single track on the album *Trapped in Crime* featuring Snoop Dogg (C-Murder 2000).

Esu of the Yoruba is the precolonial trickster that dominates on this track. Esu is a member to a pantheon of gods among the Yoruba. What the chart-topping single suggests is a rallying call. Although crass and violent, C-Murder is calling to arms his family to be prepared to defend itself against enemies. Esu is the youngest of Mawu-Lisa's children; Mawu-Lisa endowed Esu with the power to traverse boundaries in order to maintain peace among the gods and the Yoruba (Pelton 1980). A tale tells of Esu's ability to act as a translator and mediator for his brothers the Earth and Sky gods. In the tale, Esu lies to his Mother and brothers in order to achieve the result Mawu asked from the outset. In doing so, now the sky and earth work in harmony to yield water and flora and fauna for the Yoruba people (Mbiti 1970). In the contemporary moment, C-Murder is dominated by Esu and it manifests in this track:

> Bitch I'm down with no limit, I'll ride for the cause/
> I'm the nigga on the tank with the big fuckin' balls/
> And if anybody fuck with snoop doggy dogg/
> I'ma make these niggas put his name on the wall… (C-Murder 2000).

What is apparent in these lyrics is the fierce loyalty that C-Murder has to his label mate, Snoop Dogg. It also implies that revenge would be taken against those who disrupt the harmony among C-Murder and his compatriots. Even the use of the controversial N-word on the track suggests an exclusivity to this listener. Those who identify as such are under the protection of C-Murder and those featured on the track. Furthermore, the presence of Esu in the content of the lyrics is the description of contemporary funerary rituals. Esu is of the crossroads, he represents the joviality of life

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and the somberness of death and transition. And Although brought about by violence what C-Murder describes is how contemporarily we memorialize folks who have died. "I'ma make these niggas put his name on the wall.../ And have your picture on front of a t-shirt…And then buried you on your own land…" (Ibid). It is easy to get caught in the violence being described on this track. Esu is also described as having a fierce temper and is quick to anger; culturally Yoruba did not think it was he was a societal menace. Then and now, audiences would call this content nihilistic and criminalize C-Murder. Esu enjoys the same maltreatment, Esu is demonized in contemporary Western Catholicism, literature, and visual media (Edwards 1985). Yet when Esu and other tricksters are aligned with rappers and the Hip Hop culture the ontological kinship is illumined.

Conclusion

Anubis is the progeny deity-trickster, and elder African deity whose function and role was invaluable in ancient Kemet. As precolonial Africans migrated west on the continent, the Yoruba, Fon, Ashanti, and Dogon ethnicities developed and maintained a culture. They all developed a hybridized trickster-deity to inform them not just of the death and transition rituals but for the ongoing lived experience of their respective ethnic groups. After centuries undisturbed by outsider invaders, missionaries, and captors Africans were forced in to a system of chattel slavery. This is a pivotal moment, in that Africans scrambled to maintain a sense of agency while captured and were forced to amalgamate tricksters in their collective imaginations. It is this collective memory and imagination that I assert is present and working in millennial rap music. Specifically, in the year 2000, the Post-Civil Rights American south, rappers expose their ontological tie to ancient African trickster deities. Da Brat, Juvenile, Mystikal, and C-Murder are the chart-topping rappers whose popularity in the year 2000 reify the success of the rap music genre, and the lineage of trickster deities present in rap music genres. It is integral to sift through the past in an act of Sankofa to retrieve, rediscover and reify traditions lost to their descendants in order to help process the contemporary moments. Yet most contemporary works fall short in excavating the Ancient African lineage of contemporary rap music. This work seeks to fill voids in the study of the rap music genre, African American/ African

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studies, and North American folkloric studies since this research has intersections in each field of study. Scholars, and folklorists need reach in to antiquity to affirm the rap music and rappers' antecedent. Contemporary academic works on Hip-Hop culture focus on its proliferation and critique of Hip-Hop and Rap studies in the academy. Non-academic works, like memoirs are popular in the invasive social media age, but do not focus on the accuracy of the tradition as much as individual experiences whilst a participant in Hip-Hop culture. This research asserts a lineage of rap genres and Hip Hop culture that extends past the land mass of North America to the Western Coasts of Africa in order to reify that a pre-colonial trickster is manifest in contemporary Hip Hop culture and rap music.

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